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### **Editorial: The European Society for Social Drug Research: a reflection on research trends over time**

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## **The European Society for Social Drug Research: a reflection on research trends over time**

### **History of the European Society for Social Drugs Research**

The European Society for Social Drug Research (ESSD) was founded in 1990 as an association of European social scientists working on drug issues. The Society's principal aim is to promote social science approaches to drug research with special reference to the situation in Europe, and with a particular focus on qualitative studies. The establishment of ESSD was a response to a keenly felt need for closer co-operation within the social science community to meet, exchange research findings and explore possibilities for future co-operation, and to act as a counterpoint to the then dominant medical and therapeutic epistemologies of addiction science.

Membership of the Society is open to European scholars, researchers or analysts working on issues related to psychoactive substances (prohibited or otherwise) in the social science field. Currently, there are just over 200 registered members from 30 countries.

Each year, the society holds an annual conference in a different European city in partnership with a local host institution with the venue alternating between North, South, East and West Europe. To date, twenty-seven conferences have been held in twenty countries. For over a decade, the Society has published an annual book with chapters by ESSD members on the key themes emerging from that year's conference. For 2017, the Society has collaborated with the journal *Drugs: education, prevention and policy* (DEPP) to publish this special focus issue.

Since the first ESSD annual conference was held at Cologne in Germany in 1990, nearly all participants have taken an active role by presenting their own research. This approach is a characteristic feature of ESSD conferences and facilitates participants sharing experiences with their colleagues across Europe. Because active participation has always been a key feature of the conferences, the ESSD has never sought to greatly enlarge the number of conference participants beyond 50, of whom approximately 35 give a presentation. There are no parallel sessions and all presentations last for 15 minutes with much room for discussion and the exchange of

ideas – an approach that is inclusive to young and new researchers. This conference format facilitates discussions on the similarities and dissimilarities from a cross-national perspective so that the variations in the drug phenomenon and their socio-cultural determinants are better understood.

An overview of the presentations and discussions at the conferences (from 1990-2016) nicely illustrates continuity and change in the evolving drug landscapes and drug policies in Europe, as well as in methodological and theoretical approaches in social drug research.<sup>1</sup>

All conferences have included presentations on the epidemiology of drug use with a focus on historical and cross-national issues. In the 1990s, presentations on HIV and AIDS, and death from overdose dominated. From the late 1990s onwards there has been a more general emphasis on harm and harm reduction. Although the interest in harm reduction targeting marginalized drug users (e.g. substitution, syringe exchange, consumption rooms) did not fully disappear, by and large the attention shifted from intravenous drug users to other user groups, recreational users in particular.

This evolution reflects developments in the illicit drugs market – such as the growing popularity of MDMA, the renewed interest in psychedelic drugs, and more recently the increased use of NPS. It also reflects a greater priority in ESSD for qualitative studies. This has been accompanied by a shift towards research in other settings (from ‘street scenes’ and drug services to nightlife); a keen interest in user perspectives, the meaning they give to drugs and their polydrug repertoires; and an emphasis on the interaction between drugs, set and setting in order to better understand drug use and drug users.

Most ESSD conferences explicitly addressed criminological issues. In some years the focus was predominantly on the supply side of the illicit drugs market, whereas in other years more presentations dealt with the demand side (how and where users

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<sup>1</sup> This discussion is largely based on (an analysis of) previous ESSD conferences and publications. For references: see [www.essd-research.eu](http://www.essd-research.eu).

acquire drugs) or issues such as drug-related crime. From the early 2000s onwards, three themes dominated the contributions to and discussions about the drug market: the growing role of domestic cannabis cultivation and cannabis social clubs; technological innovation, globalization and online supply; social media and social supply.

While debates on certain methodological issues have persisted (e.g. self-report reliability, validity of official data on illicit drug use), new issues relate to technological developments that have brought new opportunities in data collection, for example online surveys and virtual ethnography. Within ESSD, these innovations fuel the debate on the relevance and value of classic ethnographic methods in contemporary social drug research - and the debate on ethical questions such as confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent that are raised by new methods in social drug research.

Over the years, concepts such as 'normalisation', 'problem use', 'recreational use', 'polydrug use', 'self-regulation', and 'social supplier' have been significant issues in theoretical debates. Finally, drug policy has always been a theme for critical reflection and discussion at ESSD conferences, for example about cross-national or historical analysis of formal social control (e.g. criminalisation and decriminalisation; the role and power of professionals in treatment), evidence-based drug policy, and the relationship between drug policy and research.

### **Content of this special issue**

Contributions to this special focus issue – all of which were presented at the ESSD 2016 annual conference in Frankfurt, Germany – encapsulate the continuity and change in the themes and methodologies from previous ESSD conferences and publications. The papers include a qualitative exploration of how Norwegian adults practice and present their cannabis use (Dahl & Demant, 2017); three mixed-methods studies which include an examination of the consequences of criminalisation of khat in the Netherlands (Nabben & Korf, 2017), an analysis of media framing of and by Cannabis Social Clubs in Belgium (Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017), and a study of online discussions by NPS users in Hungary (Kaló & Móró, 2017); and, a critical analysis of how drug policy documents and discourses in

Ireland present and problematise 'affected families' (Devaney, 2017).

Recurring themes of deviancy and normative assumptions; stigma, 'othering' and social exclusion; and the power of media and professional expertise to construct problems, frame discourses and set policy agendas run through these papers. For example, there has been a long-standing tradition in research presented at ESSD conferences challenging the normative assumptions and stereotypes associated with drug use and drug users. Here, Dahl & Demant's (2017) study of Norwegian adult cannabis users challenges the notion that cannabis use is linked to youth lifestyles. This study also illustrates the recurring conference theme of stigma and the use of social distancing tactics by one drug using person or group to differentiate themselves from 'other' users perceived as problematic in some fashion. In the case of this paper, adults who use cannabis performed their cannabis use so as to distance themselves from 'immature adolescent users'. In so doing, they presented a mature narration of socially integrated cannabis use – using the drug in their leisure time, outside of work and family obligations – as the main basis for legitimising their continued use at a time when maturing out of cannabis use is socially expected in their society.

The Somali migrant khat users interviewed by Nabben and Korf (2017) have little power to claim a socially integrated status or to make a claim that their use of khat is a legitimate cultural tradition. The authors traced the outcomes of the legislation prohibiting the sale and use of khat in the Netherlands in 2013. This prohibition was ostensibly framed in parliamentary debates as a solution to improve the social position of migrants and to concur with international legislation. However, the findings indicate that though the criminalisation of khat succeeded in reducing the total number of khat users in the Netherlands, the proportion of users who were poor dependent problem users increased. Thereby, reducing the scale of the issue but intensifying the problems associated with it. In addition, the price of the drug increased greatly (tenfold on average), and quality decreased. The authors also noted the switch from street khat markets (marfresh/mafrish) to a distribution system based on telephone orders and home delivery.

The impact of technology on drug markets has been a recurring theme at ESSD

conferences since the advent of mobile phones and the internet have impacted on once dominant street-based drug markets. The new phenomenon of NPS (new psychoactive substances) use is seen to be inextricably linked to internet communication. As Kaló and Móró (2017) point out, in their study of Hungarian on-line NPS discussion fora, the internet has provided a 'technical solution for marketing, commerce, and communication' of NPS. Their findings provide a moot reminder that people are not homogenised by the types of drugs they use, despite much drug policy taking this view, and that local risk environments provide a crucial context to understanding trends. The discussions analysed by the authors did not resemble those of the tech-savvy cyber-psychonaut communities found elsewhere on clear-web or dark-web sites. In contrast, the discussions portrayed an 'escapist' form of drug use linked to social distress and hopelessness in the context of a challenging socio-economic environment. Against this background, the main form of harm reduction was 'economic' harm reduction with peer warnings about rogue on-line traders. The findings suggest the need for more differentiated on-line prevention interventions and harm reduction measures targeted to the needs, resources and capabilities of the users. These NPS users were found to also use social distancing tactics to dissociate their use from other users, mainly people from the Roma community. They also shared the exaggerated media stories about NPS and were seen to internalise the stereotypical image of NPS users as self-harming, reckless menaces to society in their local media.

The power of the media to influence attitudes and opinions is noted by Pardal and Tieberghien (2017) in their study of cannabis social clubs (CSCs) in Belgium. Their research examined how CSC activists strategically cultivated relationships with the print media and drew on medical expertise and knowledge to influence how their activities were reported. The CSC advocates sought to frame discourses and influence policy agendas by illustrating the potential for the model - whereby collectives of adult cannabis users organise the cultivation and distribution of the drug among themselves, generally on a non-profit basis – for providing a middle ground between cannabis prohibition and commercial legalisation. The researchers noted a 'subtle shift' in how the CSC model was framed in the media over time and how discourses on CSCs evolved to reflect the standpoint of the organisations which came to be portrayed as being involved in more pro- rather than anti-social activities.

They note, however, that this shift in media representation had not yet impacted on policy.

The production and construction of ‘problems’ in the drugs field and the forms of knowledge and expertise that have the power to shape policy is explored in Devaney’s (2017) study of how ‘affected family members’ (adults affected by the substance use of a close relative) have been problematised in drugs policy in Ireland. The author notes that the way a problem is represented in policy serves to justify how ‘the problem’ is remedied. In the research paper from the Netherlands (Nabben & Korf, 2017), we see how the representation of khat markets as a problem for the Somali community justifies its prohibition as a solution for them. In Devaney’s (2017) paper, we see how the representation of the family in drug policy documents was influenced in turn by expertise from biomedical and psychological sciences, criminology, and subsequently health psychology. Consequently, the construction of families evolved from being pathological and contributing to both the problem and solution of adolescent drug use to being represented as a key resource in recovery capital but as needing support in this role and, as such, constructed as service users in their own right.

The papers in this special focus issue underline the importance of new empirical work in capturing the complexities of how drug use is performed, practiced and problematised in our everyday world. What this overview and the papers that follow make clear is that change does happen - drug trends come, go and adapt to their local environment; attitudes shift; and policies and responses adapt as new evidence and new power struggles emerge and influence policy and practice. Overall, this special focus issue illustrates the unique contribution social science research can make to understanding drug use and the people who use drugs. Doing so from a European perspective, at a time when the normative assumptions of what it is to be European are changing rapidly, is more crucial than ever.

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